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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 05 SKOPJE 000251

SIPDIS

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STATE FOR EUR/SCE, EUR/RPM FOR PDAS VOLKER
DEFENSE FOR OSD (SSCHLESS)
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SUBJECT: MACEDONIA: GOVERNMENT FOCUSED ON GAMEPLAN FOR NATO
MEMBERSHIP PREPARATIONS

REF: SKOPJE 207

Classified By: P/E CHIEF SHUBLER, REASONS 1.4(B) & (D).

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: During her March 7-8 visit to Skopje with a U.S. interagency delegation, USNATO Ambassador Nuland told Macedonian government and opposition interlocutors that free and fair parliamentary elections would be one key to keeping NATO's door open in 2008. She urged them to continue Framework Agreement (FWA) implementation, enhance religious freedom protection, strengthen rule of law, and improve business conditions to make the best possible case for Macedonia's NATO membership prospects in 2008. She noted that time is of the essence and that Macedonia must be ready to make that case by mid-2007. She urged the government to work on promoting Macedonia abroad as a stable, multi-ethnic democracy. Amb. Nuland praised Macedonia's progress on defense reforms, strong defense spending, and ambitious overseas deployment activities, while cautioning against "overheating."

¶2. (SBU) Government and opposition interlocutors acknowledged the critical importance of free and fair elections, and generally agreed that FWA implementation had been successful to date. They agreed on the need to continue judicial reforms; to combat corruption, police abuse and trafficking in persons; and to improve the business investment climate. They acknowledged the need to improve Macedonia's image abroad. Nearly all noted the nationwide and party-wide consensus on the desirability of NATO membership. The government knows it has its NATO membership gameplan and much hard work ahead to execute it. Our challenge will be keeping the government focused on the gameplan during the pre-electoral campaign period, and ensuring the next government moves quickly to deepen reforms. End Summary.

INTERAGENCY USG DELEGATION VISIT MARCH 7-8

¶3. (U) USNATO Ambassador Victoria Nuland led a US interagency delegation to Skopje March 7-8 for discussions with President Crvenkovski, and with Prime Minister Buckovski, FM Mitreva, MOD Manasievski, Deputy PM Xhaferi and other senior

government officials. The delegation also met with opposition leaders in the parliament, and with Parliamentary Speaker (PS) Jordanovski and the Parliamentary Committees on Foreign Affairs and Defense and Security. Ambassador Nuland gave a presentation on "NATO in the 21st Century" to government officials, members of the diplomatic corps, think-tank representatives and the media, under the auspices of the Macedonian Euro-Atlantic Council on March 8. Members of the US delegation included EUR PDAS Kurt Volker; OSD Principal Director for Eurasia Scott Schless; CAPT Paul "Chip" Jaenicken, Chief of Western Europe/Balkans Division, JCS; COL. Michael Anderson, EUCOM ECJ5-E Director of the Europe Division; and USNATO POLOFF Alejandro Baez. Ambassador, DATT (notetaker), and P/E Chief (notetaker) accompanied the delegation.

KEY US MESSAGES:

--FREE AND FAIR ELECTIONS KEY TO KEEPING NATO'S OPEN DOOR OPEN

¶4. (SBU) In her meetings, Ambassador Nuland said the USG wanted to help Macedonia become the strongest possible candidate for NATO membership by 2008. Macedonia's success as a multi-ethnic democracy was a model for the region and beyond, but the roots of the country's democracy needed to be strengthened. As a first priority, the government and opposition had to ensure the freest, fairest parliamentary elections in 2006; otherwise, the door to NATO would close for 2008.

--FWA IMPLEMENTATION, RELIGIOUS FREEDOM, STRENGTHEN RULE OF LAW, IMPROVE BUSINESS CONDITIONS

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¶5. (SBU) Nuland stressed that Macedonia needed to continue implementation of the 2001 Ohrid Framework Agreement (FWA); to enhance protection of religious freedom; to step up efforts to combat police corruption and abuses, as well as trafficking in persons; and to complete the packet of judicial reforms it had begun in 2005. The courts had to become fully functional, with at least several major corruption cases prosecuted by mid-2007. The government also had to ensure that privatization of the national electrical power supply company was a "model of transparency;" that would help improve investor confidence in the country.

--TIME IS OF THE ESSENCE, WORK ON IMPROVING MACEDONIA'S IMAGE, NO MEMBERSHIP GUARANTEE

¶6. (SBU) Nuland urged the government, parliament, and opposition leaders to work together "in national unity" to coordinate efforts on NATO accession criteria. Time was of the essence, since key reforms had to be completed or well underway by mid-2007.

¶7. (SBU) Nuland pointed out that Europeans do not view developments in Macedonia as positively as does the US. The country still has an image problem, especially with Germany, Netherlands, and the Nordic countries. The GOM would have to promote a new image by telling Macedonia's story to European governments, parliamentarians, and elites. Similarly, Macedonia needs to reach out to the U.S. Senators who would have to ratify Macedonia's NATO candidacy.

¶8. (SBU) Although the U.S. would support Macedonia, Nuland stressed that the responsibility for meeting NATO's performance-based standards ultimately falls to the government, the opposition, and the citizens of Macedonia. There were no guarantees; NATO decisions on membership would be based on individual performance. At the Riga Summit, Allies would reaffirm NATO's Open Door policy, possibly adding encouraging language tailored for each aspirant.

--DEFENSE REFORMS ON TRACK, DON'T OVERHEAT

¶ 9. (SBU) Nuland said Macedonia's overseas deployments and financial commitment to defense spending were admirable, but that the government had to be careful to avoid "overheating."

She thanked Macedonia for becoming a "net exporter of security," and urged continued progress on defense reforms and downsizing. Nuland said it was important to continue efforts to build an ethnically representative military, while at the same time not sacrificing quality.

ELECTIONS: DISPELLING ATMOSPHERE OF MUTUAL MISTRUST

¶ 10. (C) PM Buckovski acknowledged the importance of the parliamentary elections; the government wanted to hold them before the first week in July to give the next government time enough to constitute itself and continue the reform process. FM Mitreva noted that the government wanted to ensure that the elections did not detract from the reform process.

¶ 11. (SBU) Opposition VMRO-DPMNE leader Gruesvki expressed concern that the government's draft electoral code would be subject to manipulation, increasing chances of fraud during the elections. He said the opposition wanted to dispel the atmosphere of mistrust and find a compromise on the electoral code. (NOTE: Over the March 11-12 weekend, the government and opposition parties reached a compromise on the key sticking point in the electoral code regarding composition of local election boards. END NOTE.)

¶ 12. (SBU) Other ethnic Macedonian opposition leaders agreed on the need for a compromise on the electoral code. VMRO-NP leader Janevska said the parties needed to find the political will to ensure free and fair elections, while ethnic Albanian PDP leader Veseljli commented that all parties had to bear responsibility for the fair conduct of the elections.

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Veseljli did, however, lay the main burden on the government "since they control the police and have stuffed ballot boxes in the past." NSDP leader Tito Petkovski warned that "radicalization" during the elections could cost Macedonia its NATO membership prospect.

FWA IMPLEMENTATION AND CONSOLIDATION OF DEMOCRACY

¶ 13. (SBU) PM Buckovski noted that the FWA had helped stabilize the political situation in Macedonia. Completion of the legislative requirements of the FWA was critical in that regard, as was the ongoing decentralization process. As a result, inter-ethnic relations were stable and improving; Macedonia was willing to share its experiences in that regard with Kosovo and other countries in the region.

¶ 14. (SBU) Deputy PM Xhaferi agreed that the FWA was a success story and a model for the region. However, the government had to continue FWA implementation, including consolidation of a multi-ethnic police force and decentralization. Remaining legal provisions for the use of minority languages, and continued progress in implementing equitable representation, also were important. PS Jordanovski said the FWA's legislative requirements had been completed, but noted that "democratic rights can always be further enhanced."

¶ 15. (SBU) Foreign Affairs Committee Chair Teuta Arifi said the country was now moving from the FWA's initial focus on security and stability to the "second phase" of consolidation of democracy. The country needed "good elections and judicial reforms not because of NATO requirements, but because of us," she added.

¶ 16. (SBU) Iljaz Halimi, of the opposition ethnic Albanian DPA, complained the FWA was not being fully implemented, in particular equitable representation and the minority language use provisions. He also complained about police mistreatment of ethnic minorities, citing the recent police shooting of an ethnic Albanian criminal suspect in the Skopje suburb of

Kondovo (reftel).

JUDICIAL REFORMS AND IMPROVING BUSINESS CLIMATE.

¶17. (SBU) Noting that judicial reforms were the government's second key goal, after completing FWA implementation, Buckovski said the government was committed to promoting the rule of law and to fighting organized crime and corruption, which would help improve the foreign investment climate. Buckovski noted that the government was working on a new bankruptcy law to further improve the business climate.

¶18. (SBU) President Crvenkovski added that, between 2001-2002, inter-ethnic conflict had prevented progress on judicial and economic reforms. The situation had changed significantly since then. Judicial reforms would be completed in 2006 and implementation would begin in 2007. Nuland noted that implementation needed to begin before 2007, before the US conducted its next assessment of Macedonia's progress on MAP implementation. Crvenkovski agreed. He said that the results of the government's economic liberalization policies would gradually be evident, and would reflect the status of other ongoing reform processes (e.g., transparent privatization, independent judiciary, political stability).

¶19. (SBU) Opposition leaders disagreed with Buckovski's optimistic characterization of progress on reforms, complaining that the government had passed numerous laws which it had then failed to implement. They accused the government of lacking the political will to implement tough reforms, of neglecting economic issues, and -- in one case -- of allowing discrimination against ethnic Macedonians by the ethnic Albanian mayor of Gostivar in western Macedonia. (Comment: The Gostivar mayor has received both praise and criticism from residents -- both ethnic Macedonian and ethnic Albanian -- for enforcing zoning laws and tearing down buildings constructed without the necessary permits. End

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Comment.)

DEFENSE "TRANSFORMATION FEVER"

¶20. (SBU) MOD Manasievski said his Ministry is in a "transformation fever," having received a "very positive PARP assessment" this year. The government was committed to maintaining defense spending at approximately 2.3 percent of GDP annually, and would nearly triple its deployment of troops overseas in 2006 to support alliance operations, with possible additional increases in the future. The MOD also was supporting regional defense cooperation arrangements beyond its involvement in the Adriatic Charter, having established separate cooperation arrangements with Albania and Bulgaria, and with Albania and Greece. PS Jordanovski noted the parliament's role in adopting key laws related to Macedonia's MAP process, and said Macedonia would continue to "do its part, hoping not for reward, but recognition" for that effort.

WORKING ON MACEDONIA'S IMAGE -- SUBSTANCE REQUIRED

¶21. (SBU) President Crvenkovski said Macedonians knew how much work was left to be done, and how much depended on them if the country was to succeed in its NATO membership aspirations. He said the government understood the importance of lobbying abroad to improve the country's image, but that effort could succeed only if there was "substance" behind the image. The country's overall image also would be important to investors seeking a secure investment location. Crvenkovski said he would visit various EU countries to explain the progress Macedonia had made, both to gain support for Macedonia's NATO prospects, and to reassure potential investors.

STRONG PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR NATO

¶22. (SBU) President Crvenkovski noted the strong inter-ethnic consensus in Macedonia for NATO membership, adding that the process of integration into NATO had translated into "internal integration for the country." FM Mitreva commented that -- at 90 percent -- public support for NATO membership was "the highest ever for an aspirant country." PS Jordanovski also noted the "party-wide, nationwide consensus in favor of joining NATO." PDAS Volker urged the government to "use that support as a base for achieving the strategic consensus" required to carry out MAP-related reforms.

COMPLEMENTARITY OF NATO/EU REFORMS

¶23. (SBU) FM Mitreva pointed out that the reforms the government was implementing to meet EU membership criteria (judicial, police, economic) coincided with what was needed to meet NATO MAP requirements. Many of those requirements already had been met. She also noted government plans to form a special high-level interagency NATO Task Force that would include government, NGOs, business leaders, members of parliament, and the opposition to help pass and implement MAP-related reforms.

RIGA SUMMIT: WE NEED A NATO SIGNAL

¶24. (SBU) PM Buckovski noted that Macedonia's NATO aspirations are the government's key priority, and that Macedonia hoped for a clear message from the Riga Summit declaration on its membership prospects. He asked Nuland to "be our Iron Lady" in supporting Macedonia in Riga. FM Mitreva echoed that line, saying the country needed a clear message on enlargement. Foreign Affairs Committee Chair Arifi asked that the "internal deliberations" at the 2006 summit "not preclude the western Balkans," since "we need NATO, and NATO needs us."

COMMENT

¶25. (C) The US delegation's visit was invaluable to focus the

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government, opposition, and media on the key reforms required by mid-2007 for Macedonia to make its case for NATO membership. The Prime Minister's National Security Adviser told us that the PM gathered Mitreva, Manasievski, and his cabinet staff together after the meeting with Amb. Nuland and told them: "we have our gameplan, now we have a lot of work to do." Our challenge will be keeping the government focused on continuing the reform process through the distractions of the electoral campaign period, and ensuring there is continuity in that effort afterwards, regardless of which parties form the next coalition government. End Comment.

MILOVANOVIC